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ABSTRACT

This account of efforts to reconstruct educational research in China, guided by Marxist principles and reflective of a national policy of building a "socialist spiritual civilization," presents the major requirements of that endeavor. Educational sciences are to be guided by four understandings: correct theories; realistic policies; improved teaching methods; and necessary rules and regulations. In addition, China's research on educational sciences will abide by the following guidelines: orientation toward modernization, to the outside world, and to the future; adherence to the principle of integrating theory and practice; correct handling of relationships between national construction and education, between macro- and micro-research, between basic and applied sciences, between research and experimentation, and between criticism and appreciation of inheritance; and establishment of a "good style of learning" within the educational research community. China's educational research community has set for itself as the following major task goals during the Seventh Five-Year Plan period, to engage in research on: (1) general educational guidelines and major educational theories; (2) development strategy; (3) reforms of education; (4) ethics education; (5) comparative education; (6) evaluation and management; and (7) legislation. It is acknowledged that, in order to reach these goals, major efforts in coordination and funding are needed. (MDE)

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EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN CHINA:

GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND MAJOR TASKS

A Paper Prepared for
the Annual Meeting of
The American Educational Research Association
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by

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EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN CHINA

----- Guiding Principles and Major Tasks

WU Wei*

I

On September 27, 1986, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party adopted a Resolution on the Guidelines for Socialist Spiritual Civilization, which states at the very outset that the general plan for China's socialist modernization is to take economic construction as the central task while unswervingly carrying out reforms in economic and political structures and firmly promoting the build-up of socialist ethics. Efforts should be made to ensure that work in the above fields would coordinate with and promote one another. As the foundation for modernization, education plays a strategic role in the development of all aspects of national life, and it is therefore being further strengthened. The basic task of the building of socialist spiritual civilization is to meet the needs of socialist modernization and bring about citizens with socialist ideals, ethics, culture and good sense of disciplines so as to raise the ethical, scientific and cultural level of the whole Chinese nation. This is in fact the basic responsibility of socialist education.

In the socialist period, material civilization provides the material condition and practical experience for the promotion of spiritual civilization. In return, the latter gives impetus and know-how support to the building of material civilization and ensures it the correct orientation for development. This mutually-complementary promotion between the two civilizations is another eloquent proof of

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the essential status and role of education. The building of socialist spiritual civilization includes the promotion of both ethics as well as sciences and culture, which are all undoubtedly closely related to education. As the core component of socialist spiritual civilization, education finds its place in the entire course of material civilization and every aspect of social life: economy, politics, culture, etc. All this amply shows that the level of education of a given country determines the over-all strength and social development of that country. Therefore, turning China into a socialist power with highly developed civilization and democracy would only be an empty talk if no serious and adequate attention is paid to education and if there is no quality education and a growing professional resource.

Nothing can really be achieved if one goes against the law of nature. To do a good job in education hinges on the guidance of educational sciences.

We put stress on the guidance of educational sciences on the following understanding: If our education is to be truly effective, we must first have correct theories and orientation for our education; Secondly, our educational policies must be in line with reality; Thirdly, the contents and methods of teaching must be improved, and Fourthly, necessary rules and regulations must be stipulated. None of these four points can be separated from educational sciences. On the contrary, they should all give reflections to the objective law of education.

It is obvious that the creation and elaboration of educational theories are inseparable from the guidance of educational sciences. All educational policies must be

consistent with the objective laws of education. Again, we need the guidance and verification by educational sciences to find out whether the theories that have already been put forward are being correctly applied and whether they can achieve the desired social effects. Besides, the laws governing education find their embodiment in education theories and policies, which often take the forms of decrees, rules and regulations. Therefore, the research on educational sciences is the basis and pre-condition for the perfection of education policies and legislations.

II

In order to ensure a truly good performance in China's research on educational sciences, we abide by the following guidelines:

1. To persist in "three orientations" and "two musts".

Under the guidance of Marxism, the research on educational sciences in China should "be oriented to modernization, to the outside world and to the future" and should help implement the policy of "education must serve socialist construction and socialist construction must rely on education" --- which is called in short form "three orientations and two musts". This, in our view, should be the supreme criterion determining whether the research is on the right track and whether it is successful.

To be oriented to modernization requires that the research workers on educational sciences must acquaint themselves with the vivid reality of the schools and the society as well as the booming socialist construction, select subjects for research from the cause of modernization, be good at summarizing fresh experience and explore new laws of education. They should not lock themselves up in their studies and libraries hoping to find the ready answers from the old papers.

To be oriented to the outside world means that the research work should be carried out with far-sightedness and the research workers should stand ready to learn the strong points of other countries. China should never again close its doors and become intoxicated in blindness.

To be oriented to the future demands the scientific forecast of the needs of the future in education and preparation of proficient personnel in good time bearing in mind the long-term interest of the country and the nation and the fact that education is an undertaking of slow-returns. Research is considered successful only when it provides guidance to the actual work. It would be too late to start digging the well only when one feels thirsty. Longing for quick returns without doing painstaking work would only land oneself in a difficult position.

"Two musts" actually refers to the correct handling of the relationship between those to be served and those to be relied upon. Scientific approach is the objective law governing education, a law that should never be neglected for a single moment in the entire course of socialist modernization. It encompasses the correct handling of the dialectical relationship between economic means of constraints and planned preparation of professional people, the relationship between the internal and external proportions in education and the effective improvement in the economic efficiency and social effects of education. Research in educational sciences should provide excellent service to socialist education and educational reforms, point out for them correct orientation and help them solve some key problems. In light of those requirements, I must say that Chinese educational research is far from meeting the needs of the reality. On the other hand, however, no adequate attention has been given to educational research

in China, and manpower, financial and material support in this regard remains insufficient. As certain people do not yet quite understand the essential role of educational research, they cannot possibly know how to rely on its help. Efforts perhaps should be made by both sides to correct such state of affairs. On the part of the educational establishments and educational research workers, they should adhere to the correct orientation for their work, that is, to persist in serving the society and improving their work so that they may be truly worthy of the name of dependable service and win the trust of various departments and the society as a whole.

2. To adhere to the principle of integrating theory with practice. From their practice over the years, the Chinese educational research workers have realized that if they want to be successful, they must earnestly study the Marxist theories. They must, in particular, deepen their understanding of the Marxist theories concerning education and try to apply them in light of the practice of the education in China. Efforts should be made to guard against and overcome two tendencies: overlooking the guiding role of Marxism on one hand and sticking too rigidly to the previous conclusions on the other without courage needed to step beyond the defined territories. The resolution adopted by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party mentioned above has put it well in saying that we should take the reality as the starting point and practice as the sole criterion verifying truth. We should be daring enough to strike a break-through to those assertions and conclusions that have been proved by practice as incorrect or obsolete. Such approach is in fact one of both applying Marxism and developing it. Hence, the educational research workers should see to it at all time that their research

must be combined with the practice of educational reforms. They should keep track of the developments in educational reform and the open policy, study new experience and new questions and explore new laws. They should be good at summarizing experience gained from practice and turning them into theories, which should be applied, verified, enriched and further developed in practice.

3. Correct handling of the relationship in the following aspects:

A. The relationship between the over-all situation in national construction and education. We used to suffer from a common defect in our research, that is, we used to confine our thinking only within the narrow field of education while neglecting analysis and research bearing in mind the over-all picture of national construction. As a result, our visions could not be broadened and we could hardly pin point the problems. Proposals and suggestions put forward then could only be general in nature and they could not help tackle the problems at the core. Education is a complex undertaking, closely related to economy, politics, sciences, culture and all aspects of social life. For instance, the on-going reforms in education can not be delinked with corresponding reforms in labour management system, personnel management and wage system. For another example, the reforms of curricula in schools are dependent on a proper understanding of the needs of the country for professionals in different fields and at different levels. Also required is adequate knowledge about the latest development in natural and social sciences. Therefore, in order to perform better in educational research, we should look beyond the scope of education and study the over-all situation of the socialist construction.

B. The relationship between macro-research and micro-study. Partly due to the reasons I cited in Point A, the educational research in China in the past, particularly before 1980, was

mainly confined to micro-research, overlooking somewhat macro-research. It used to centre around school teaching, particularly teaching in primary and middle schools. The research on higher education started only a few years ago. As a result, government leadership at various levels, relevant departments and the society as a whole knew very little about educational sciences. They even felt somewhat alien to them, because educational research did not give reflections to the questions that they were concerned most. A major defect in China's education in the past was that it was not closely integrated with national construction, and educational research was simply nothing but like working in a "dreamland in outer-space". Such being the case, the research could not be filled with vitality and could hardly win the recognition of the society. To change such abnormal state of affairs, we will try to properly handle the relationship between macro and micro researches. To meet the pressing needs of educational reforms, the research institutes, particularly those at central and provincial levels, should concentrate their efforts on macro-research, including research on such major issues like educational theories, teaching guidelines, major educational policies and educational system, etc. Generally speaking, macro-research should give guidance to micro-research while the latter serves as the foundation of the former.

C. The relationship between basic and applied researches. While attention paid to education in China was inadequate in the past, educational research received even less importance. Consequently, educational researches including basic and applied researches in China remain rather weak today. Even to this date, many educationists including leading officials at different levels do not study hard educational sciences and theories. At the time of decision-making, more often than

not they issue directives according to their past experience. Thus, they can not free themselves from blindness and subjectivism. We should indeed draw good lessons from such behaviour.

Educational research has to have a status enjoying the support of the whole nation and the whole society. The relationship between basic and applied researches must be properly dealt with. Special efforts must be made to study the major theories and issues confronting China's education and educational reforms. Applied research should be strengthened. Research institutes below the provincial level should pool efforts mainly for applied research. It should of course be pointed out that envisaged ideas and planning as well as the analysis of the results of research should be all guided by educational theories. In this sense, applied research may be considered as a motive force pushing forward theory research since applied research will involve analyses with a view to summarizing them into principles and theories, which will enrich theory research and strengthen the guiding role of educational theories.

D. The relationship between research and experimentation. While educational research was not attracting enough attention in the past, experimentation was given even less importance. Educational experimentations, if there were any, were unorganized and dispersed without long-term plans and clear objectives. There were restricted either to a single course or to certain stages of education (primary and junior middle) instead of being conducted in all the courses and throughout the entire process of education. Powerful government support to such experiments was also wanting, because there were no necessary policies and measures to guarantee the smooth sailing of the experiments. Therefore, the experiments carried out in the past often failed to achieved the desired results. Even among the research workers, there was a lack

of understanding of the importance of experimentations. They were accustomed to book knowledge and general discussions and neglected experimentations. Some even refused to regard reports on experiments as results of educational research. Such an approach was of course incorrect as it would only separate research from experimentations. In fact, educational theories and propositions come into being and are nurtured through practice. Both in China and abroad and both in the present and ancient times, noted educationists are advocates and practitioners of educational experiments. All devoted educationists not only make endeavours in educational research but also attach great importance to practice. Experiments of various kinds are important ways and means to raise the level of education and promote educational reforms. There can be no satisfactory research on educational sciences without successful experiments. All practice in education should be guided by educational theories and good performance in practice can help develop new theories and laws for education and teaching. Therefore, educational research and practice are complementary to each other.

E. The relationship between the critical approach and inheritance. Due to the "Leftist" influence that plagued China for many years, educational researches in China, the researches on educational theories in particular, were done with a bias toward the critical approach (the criticisms were often incorrect) and negligence to inheritance, bringing thus considerable loss to our work. Harms were done to honest scientists. After the overthrow of the Gang of Four and the recharting of our courses and thinking, we have again become realistic and are trying to properly handle the relationship between the critical approach and inheritance. Under the guidance of Marxism, we in China are now engaged in the great cause of reviving Chinese civilization. This

great undertaking is being conducted in an approach of critical inheritance toward historical traditions with ample stress on selecting the spirit of the present time. This undertaking is based on Chinese situation but oriented to the outside world. We shall earnestly study China's rich cultural heritage as well as educational theories and experience of other countries, absorb their strong points and discard the dross in an attempt to make ancient things serve the present and foreign things serve China.

4. To establish a good style of learning in the implementation of the policy of "letting one hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend".

The success in educational research depends heavily on a good style of learning. Educationists must be dedicated to educational sciences and work whole-heartedly for the people. They should engage themselves in practice with a scientific approach and combine subject research with quantitative research. On the basis of their solid work in investigation and thorough analysis, they should hold free discussions among themselves on an equal footing. Only when the researches of Marxist educational theories are invigorated, can we formulate our educational policies on a more democratic and scientific basis. The academic exchange of views will only help open our visions and deepen the understanding of many issues to the benefit of better applying the objective laws and raising the academic level.

III

In compliance with the above-mentioned principles, China's educational research has set for itself the following major tasks during the Seventh Five-year Plan period: To further consolidate the notion of research work serving

educational reforms and educational development; to endeavour to provide theoretical grounds for educational policy-making and practical proposals for educational reforms; to further develop subject researches on the basis of the present accomplishments and make the researches in educational sciences a complete undertaking; to strive for major development in certain subject researches, each of which acquiring its own academic characteristics; to set up a few experimentation areas and schools with a view to accumulating successful experience for further educational reforms and raising the quality of education at large; to compile basic data on Chinese educational development and educational sciences research; to improve substantially the working conditions for research in an attempt to modernize step by step information and data-collecting on education and the means of research; and to further expand channels of exchange with foreign countries so that we may base our research on the achievements of the civilization of the contemporary world.

During the Seventh Five-year Plan period, we plan to concentrate our efforts for the research in the following subjects:

1. Research on general educational guidelines and major educational theories with a view to providing theoretical grounds for the task of bringing about citizens who are morally sound, intellectually well-educated and physically well-built, standing ready to work for modernization. We shall define the basic qualifications for people needed in the cause of spiritual and material civilizations and point out ways to educate them. Studies will also be made on those ideas that are incompatible with socialist modernization and on the backdrop from which they emerge and ways to correct them, including ways and means to tackle the the trends of excessive stress on the percentage of graduates who can be admitted to higher education.

2. Research on the development strategy for education both at national and local levels, including studies on how to integrate educational reforms with those in economic and scientific-technological systems as well as labour and personnel management. In accordance with the forecast of qualified professionals, we shall study the over-all planning for educational development and major educational policies.

3. Research on the all-round reforms of education of different types and at different levels, including education in the rural areas to help the farmers get rid of poverty and become better-off, and ways to popularize 9-year education according to the actual conditions of various localities and to coordinate regular, vocational and adult education. Research will also be conducted to explore ways to systematic reforms in schooling systems, curricula, teaching materials, teaching methods and exam systems in different areas and different schools with a view to helping education yield the maximum social benefits.

4. Research on ethics education, particularly the special characteristics of such education at the present time. In ethics building, we shall be realistic and encourage the advanced elements with proper consideration for the majority. We shall take care of the needs of both the advanced elements and the average people. We shall also make studies on how to strengthen the education of the four basic principles, patriotism, lofty ideals, democracy and legal systems. Efforts will also be made to study the impact of the different schools of thinking in the world today on China's education. We shall oppose bourgeois liberalization and boycott the decadent ideas of capitalism and feudalism. Research will also be done on the education for students who are the only children of their families.

5. To make comparisons between the educational reforms of the developed countries. Attention will also be given to educational reforms in developing countries, their main experience and the common problems they are faced with. We shall pay particular attention to the main schools of educational thinking in the world today and study the impact they have exerted on the educational policies of various countries.

6. To make research on the evaluation and management of education. It includes the setting of criteria for and stipulation of methods in evaluating the quality of teaching in different schools. Research will also be made on establishing and improving the supervisor system. Experience and theories pertaining to the reforms in educational management and systems will be studied with emphasis on the strengthening of education management in schools at county and township levels.

7. Research on education legislations, including summing up the basic experience in enforcing educational laws, decrees and regulations since the founding of the People's Republic and reviewing of the implementation of education laws in the past few years in different localities. We shall study the theories concerning the promulgation of the basic law and other laws of education. Educational legislations of other countries will also be studied.

IV

It is indeed an arduous task to reach the research targets as set forth in the preceeding paragraphs for the Seventh Five-year Plan period. We need to double our efforts in the following aspects:

1. To ensure more attention and support from the Party and Government leadership and educational administrative departments at various levels for educational research

and try to win the support of the whole country and the whole society so that educational research in China may take on a new look.

2. To improve the educational research structure. The National Leading Group responsible for the planning of educational researches should truly discharge its duties in giving guidance and coordination to the educational research in different areas and departments in the hope that a national network for educational sciences research will be established step by step. In the meantime, management of educational research should also be reformed and strengthened.

3. As more stress will be given to Macro-research and the tackling of major issues that may emerge in the course of practice, efforts from individual units with a few people will be insufficient for such tasks. Therefore, we will have to coordinate our efforts in solving some key problems. Such coordination should not only be encouraged among education workers within their own circles, they should also be encouraged to go to the society and consult other departments in an effort to make trans-regional and trans-departmental research.

4. To expand the research force with both full-time and part-time research workers. They will be selected mostly from among college graduates and those who are not education majors but interested in educational research, so as to overcome the limitations in knowledge of the present research workers. Efforts will also be made to help the young and middle-aged researchers improve their capabilities.

5. To ensure sufficient and steady financial and material support for the smooth conduct of educational research. A "National Sciences Foundation" will be set up in this regard during the Seventh Five-year Plan.

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